

Saint Rita - Wife, Mother, Widow and Religious



by an unknown Augustinian

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Umbria

In the very heart of Italy extends one of the most remarkable of its Provinces, that of Umbria. Its very name (umbra (Latin) - shade) gives us some idea of the nature of its scenery, scenery rendered so striking by its many deep forests, lovely shady valleys, delightful groves and copses varied by its rich and extensive vineyards and olive plantations. It is fitly called "the ever-verdant Umbria." It is no less renowned for the antiquity, variety and great historical associations of its monuments - its powerfully-built castles, its magnificent palaces, its venerable churches, in which such towns as Perugia, Spoleto, Foligno, Rieti, Assisi abound. It is a well-known fact that Umbria has given its name to a distinguished School of Painting - the Umbrian School - and there is scarcely a village church throughout its whole extent that does not possess some picture executed by the hand of a Master, and undoubtedly not the least of Umbria's claims to glory is the number of its children whose names are writ large in the pages of history - poets, painters, statesmen, warriors, merchant princes, and, above all, Saints. It is sufficient to mention Saint Benedict, the Father of Western Monasticism, and, later, the Seraphic Father, Saint Francis of Assisi, and the glorious Saint Clare. Towards the end of the 14th century appeared another Saint well worthy of her predecessors, a sketch of whose life we here propose to give - Saint Rita of Cascia.

"Let Margarita be her name!"

In the lower extremity of Umbria, amid rugged mountains torn by gullies that in certain seasons of the year become the beds of mountain torrents, stands in almost utter solitude and isolation from the haunts of men, the little village of Roccaporena. Like most Italian villages so situated, it has scarce changed during the course of five centuries or so. It contains no more than nineteen families in all; its people are faithful Catholics whose simple, laborious lives are spent in an endeavour to wrest a precarious living from the rocky soil along the slopes of the neighbouring mountains and from the management of their little flocks of sheep and goats. There lived here in the second half of the 14th century, a humble pair named Antonio Lotti Mancini and Amata Ferri. Though long married and now advanced in years their little home had never been blessed by the presence of a child. But they were a virtuous pair, trustful in Providence, yet cheerful and resigned; and in their old age, their faith in God was rewarded in the same way as that of the father and mother of the Precursor. It was divinely revealed to Amata that she was to be the mother of a female child who was to be specially favoured by God, and who was to receive the name of Margarita. That child was to become known throughout the world by the name of Rita - diminutive of Margarita.

Rita was born on May 22nd, 1381, and five days later was baptized in the Collegiate Church of Santa Maria at Cascia, there being no Baptismal Font in the little Church of Roccaporena. It is not surprising that prodigies surrounded the cradle of such a child. There is one that deserves particular mention. One day while the little infant, with parted lips and rhythmic breathing, was sleeping the deep

and refreshing sleep of innocence, a number of bees were observed hovering and buzzing around her head and even going in and out of her mouth, without, however, inflicting any injury whatsoever. This prodigy of the bees is not new in the lives of the Saints. Thus we read of Saint John Chrysostom and Saint Ambrose that when they were children bees built honey-combs in their hands - a symbol of their honeyed eloquence in the service of God. Bees played a prominent part throughout the whole life of Rita, and the marvel of the "Bees of Saint Rita" exists even to the present day. The pious visitor to the Monastery of the Augustinian Nuns at Cascia may still see them in the wall of the ancient cloister near the tomb of the Saint. Though similar in appearance to the ordinary honey-bee, they live a mysterious kind of life of their own. They have no sting, and their buzz is of a peculiar kind. They show themselves only at certain fixed times - on the anniversary of Rita's death, May 22nd, and on the last days of Holy Week. Immediately after such appearances, they retire into little holes in the Convent walls, blocking the entrances with a white filmy substance somewhat like white cotton-wool.

It will be of interest to recall here one of the many beautiful stories connected with the childhood of Saint Rita, which have survived down the centuries. Once, in the month of July, the parents of Rita went out to reap, taking with them the infant whom, safe in its cradle, they placed under the shade of a spreading tree. Suddenly there rushed up a reaper from a neighbouring field. He had sustained from a reaping hook a severe wound in the arm, which he vainly tried to staunch with a piece of cloth, and was on his way to Cascia to seek medical assistance. Passing near the cradle, he saw a swarm of bees hovering over the head of the child. He approached and instinctively waved his swathed arm in an endeavour to disperse them. Marvelous to relate, the bees seemed to buzz and fly about in a friendly manner as if

to let him know they intended no harm. Then he felt that the pain in his arm had suddenly ceased. Wonderingly he tore off the impoverished bandage to find that the wound had disappeared.

Some centuries later a great Pope, Urban VIII (1623-1644), expressed the desire to see one of these strange bees of Cascia. One was brought to him in a glass vessel. After examining and admiring it, he gave orders for its release. It was observed to fly off immediately in the direction of Cascia to rejoin its companions near the tomb of the Saint.

A Saintly Maid

Comparatively little is known of the early years and girlhood of Rita. Her aged parents, fully conscious of the preciousness of this treasure divinely committed to their care, gave her all, the solid training, the unobtrusive vigilance, the edifying example and loving attention of the model Christian home. Among their neighbours, they had acquired a just reputation for two things - their devotion to the Passion of Jesus and their charity in succouring those less fortunate than themselves. Their charity showed itself above all in spiritual necessities, and they were ideal peace-makers. Whenever discord arose among neighbours or in a family, they were selected as the kindest of arbiters, and their counsels of peace met with invariable success. In Rita, they had a wholehearted imitator, and to the end of her life, she put into practice the lessons of charity and peace she had learned under the parental roof.

When quite a young girl she often distributed to the poor even part of the modest food she got for her own needs, thus practising at one and the same time the virtues of charity and penance. She was gentle of disposition and extremely modest and retiring, intent only on her prayers and helping her mother in the work of the household. Her dress was always neat but plain, and it was noticed that she never indulged in the highly-coloured gowns so much affected by the woman-folk in certain country districts of Italy, especially on Feast-days. She seemed to delight in prayer. As she grew up, the duration and intense fervour of her meditations on the Passion were a source of astonishment even to her pious parents, and her reverent attitude in the church before the Blessed Sacrament edified all who saw her. We are told in the simple words of the early

biographers that it was a common thing for the mothers of the village to say to their daughters: "Oh, if you were only as good as that dear Rita!" Thus, even in her very youth, were laid the solid foundations of those heroic virtues that were to form the characteristic note of her life.

A fact narrated of her girlhood gives us an idea of how far the spirit of prayer and penance had already taken possession of Rita's soul. She asked her parents for permission to retire into a cave or into the depths of one of the neighbouring forests in order to be more free for intimate communion with God. The aged couple wondered exceedingly, but they thought it more prudent to refuse, especially as they were loath to allow out of their sight their beloved only child. They so far, however, acceded to her desire as to give her the exclusive use of an unoccupied room, a kind of attic at the top of the house. This Rita converted into a little oratory, decorating its walls with pictures of the Saints and of the scenes of the Passion; and, in order that she might have a view of the sky which, in Italy especially, by its clear blueness and majesty is such a reminder of heaven and inspirer of holy thoughts, she caused a little window to be opened in the roof. This little room, with its sky-light, may be seen to this day. Here she remained a whole year, emerging but rarely to help her mother in the busy times. She formed here the resolution of dedicating herself to Jesus as a cloistered nun, and it had become before long the great, absorbing ambition of her life.

The Young Wife

It was only her deep affection and reverence for her aged parents that induced Rita to come forth definitely from her self-imposed retreat. She felt that now, in their declining years, they had special need of her help. They, on their side, had been long discussing a project for her future. They wished to pass on their little house and belongings to some younger and stronger hands, and they were anxious besides to provide, according to their lights, for the future of their daughter. They, therefore, suggested to her that it was time to think of marriage. The proposition descended like a thunderbolt on the simple and unsuspecting heart of Rita. She had for so long entertained the tender vision of herself as a Spouse of Christ, wholly dedicated to His service. Confused and frightened, she confided to her parents her pious dreams. But they were not impressed and urged their demands. They asked her was she to abandon them in their old age and leave them unprovided for and helpless. They represented to her that all their hopes rested on her, that, after all, she could continue to sanctify herself in the world as they and she had hitherto done; that she, who had been the joy of their lives and had always carried out their smallest wish, would surely not disobey them now.

The delicate soul of Rita, though terribly disappointed, felt the full force of their appeal; she only asked for some time for reflection and prayer. In the agony of her soul, she appealed to her Crucified Jesus for light and guidance, and as a result, it was borne in upon her that she was to make the sacrifice of her own will. With the simple rectitude of mind that always distinguished her, she made known to her parents that she was willing to accede to their desires. Rita was then eighteen years of age.

The parents were overjoyed, but knowing her intense repugnance to marriage, and fearing she would change her mind, they were anxious to see her bound by matrimonial contract as soon as possible. The result was a hasty choice of a husband - for Rita left the matter entirely in their hands - a choice they were afterwards to lament most bitterly. It was a severe lesson to them as to many Christian parents who forget, in their mistaken zeal for the presumed material welfare of their children, the supreme rights of Almighty God, the common Father of us all. The marriage duly took place. The husband, named Paolo Ferdinando (Mancini), was as different a character from his gentle and saintly young wife as could possibly be imagined. Cruel, evil-disposed, heartless by nature and neglectful of his religious duties, the very virtues of Rita only seemed to arouse all the more his senseless rage, and from the very beginning, he treated her with insults, vile language and even blows.

God alone could tell what sufferings the sensitive soul of Rita had to endure from this unworthy companion, sufferings she tried to hide within her own heart. She confided everything to Jesus in prayer; she accepted everything in the spirit of sacrifice in union with Jesus; she prayed incessantly for her husband, feeling that she was now so intimately joined to him in the bonds of a holy Sacrament, she was responsible for his soul. She bore his outrageous conduct in silence, never upbraiding him or even attempting to defend herself. Instead she surrounded him with every attention in the home; made the domestic hearth as attractive for him as she possibly could; performed most exactly all her domestic duties, and even gave assistance in the garden and fields; tried to anticipate his every wish; sought to avoid anything that caused him displeasure, even to the extent of curtailing her time of prayer and reducing the number of her visits to the church - in short, she did everything in her power to bring about a change of heart.

Oh, what wonderful things have been done by the faith and love, the patience and sacrifice, the noble appeals and example of good wives and good mothers! How much under heaven has been wrought by them for the fortunate ones who were the object of their care! It was by the prayers of a great mother that the master-mind of Saint Augustine was brought into subjection to the teachings of that Church of which he was afterwards to become such a brilliant ornament and Doctor, and so it has happened over and over again in the history of the Church. It was the same Doctor who once said that the evil are allowed to exist by the Providence of God in order that they may be either converted from their iniquities or that through them the good may be exercised in virtue. Both one and the other took place in the case of Rita and her husband. He certainly gave her occasion to practise in the highest degree the most difficult of virtues, and the time came when the long-suffering patience of his wife was finally to triumph. It could not be otherwise.

No man with one spark of good in his nature could long resist the silent pleadings and the heroic fortitude of such a wife. His mind was gradually opened to see the real beauty and power of her virtue, and in spite of himself, he began to esteem and love her. His unbridled savagery was finally overcome by her constant gentleness, and there came a day when, after one of his usual outbursts he was so overcome by shame and remorse that he knelt at her feet and begged her pardon, promising a better life. That promise, aided always by his perfect wife, he faithfully kept as long as he lived.

The Devoted Mother

Rita became the mother of two sons. Alas! notwithstanding the care she lavished on them, they clearly displayed from their earliest years that they had inherited the worst qualities of their father. This was perhaps a more grievous trial for her than the neglect and cruelty of their father. After all, it is the natural and sacred ambition of every true mother, no matter how much she has to suffer from others, to keep attached to her those whom she has borne with so much pain, and tended and caressed in their tender innocence of childhood. The consolations of a mother were denied her; her children became only another scourge to afflict her. They were disobedient, quarrelsome, vindictive, and no doubt, their evil propensities were fostered by the example of their father.

A terrible incident that occurred in their early boyhood, just at that period when the passions begin to manifest themselves in all their native turbulence, served to draw out the worst that was in them. It was an incident that seemed to fill to overflowing the cup of sorrow that marriage had brought to Rita. One evening a peasant from the village, on his way home from work, found at about a mile from Roccaporena a man stretched motionless on the road. He was quite dead, with a knife through his heart. The peasant recognized the corpse to be that of the hapless husband of Rita. Rushing to the village, he spread the news everywhere, but he had not the heart to inform the unfortunate woman most concerned. Some good women undertook the task, and, as gently as they could, made known to her that her husband had met with a severe, nay, fatal accident. Scarce comprehending what they said, she ran to the spot, and it

was only when she saw the lifeless body that the full import of the dreadful occurrence came home to her.

And then, much as she lamented the cruel blow that had struck him down, her chief anxiety was for the state of his soul. Had he died in the grace of God? Were, perhaps, his last thoughts, his last words on earth, those of passionate hatred and vindictiveness? These were the doubts that tormented her for weeks. She prayed as even she had never prayed before; she had Masses said, she stormed heaven on his behalf, nor did she rest until she received an assurance from on high that his soul had found eternal rest. How highly favoured this man had been in the possession of a wife so rare.

New trials awaited her. She was now alone, without protection, without support and burdened with the responsibility of providing for herself and her two intractable sons. The problem of material sustenance was easily enough overcome through her gains from hard and menial labour; but what caused her indescribable pain were the threats and imprecations of her sons against the murderer of their father. They swore they would have revenge and that they would not rest until they had exacted blood for blood. It was in vain that she implored them to desist from their terrible resolution. It was in vain, as it seemed, that she prayed to God to change their hearts, offering even her own life in return for their souls. Finally, in an agony of despair, she begged of God to take them from her and from the world rather than that they should imbrue their hands with blood. This heroic prayer reminds us of the Mother of Maccabees who offered her sons to the executioner rather than see them violate the laws of God. This time her prayer was heard. Within a year, the two sons died, one shortly after the other, and their deaths, sanctified by the presence of Rita, were those of true Christians. It was a terrible wrench for the

heart of this grand wife and mother to be thus parted from all who were dear to her on earth. It went against her deepest natural feelings but from the supernatural point of view, it marked the beginning of a new and higher life. The last ties that bound her to earth were broken. Now more than ever did she feel nearer to her Father in Heaven, and there arose once more in her soul the desire to live entirely for God, and, if possible, to dedicate herself to His service in the cloister.

In The Hermitage

Near the village, there rose a great rock, like a vast tower, accessible only on one side by a tortuous path. At its summit was a natural cave formed by a great projecting piece of rock, which served as a roof. This was the place of refuge selected by Rita in this crisis of her life. Such places, situated high above the scenes of worldly cares, have always exercised a profound attraction for the saints. There they have found themselves as it were, nearer to Heaven, freer to contemplate the Infinite and to receive the divine inspirations. Near the mouth of the cave, Rita erected a simple cross made of two pieces of wood. Prostrate before this she begged of God to make known His Will and give her the strength to carry it out. Here also, she practised penances that strike us with awe even to read of - fasts, flagellations and long vigils spent in meditation.

This rude retreat has been regarded ever since as a sacred spot, and the people still point out to the visitor the miraculous imprint of her left foot and knees. A little chapel was raised over the spot as late as 1923. Before that date, it was marked by a wooden cross.

How long Rita remained in the cave we cannot say for certain. We only know that one day she came down from her retreat, distributed to the needy whatever little worldly goods remained to her and then set out for Cascia, the town with which her name was to be identified for the rest of her life and for ever. Her objective was the Monastery of Saint Mary Magdalen, belonging to the Augustinian Nuns, for it was now clear to her that it was the Divine Will that she should enter that Monastery. Arriving at the Cloister door she asked for the Superioress, before whom, on arrival, she

knelt, humbly begging for admission to the Monastery, and declaring herself ready to serve in any capacity, even the humblest. But she met only with a kind though firm refusal on the grounds that it was against the Rule and custom of the Monastery to admit widows. Over and over again, Rita returned to renew her petition in the hopes of a more favourable decision, but all in vain. Formerly it was her parents who opposed her resolution to enter Religion, now it was the nuns themselves. Humbly and patiently after each rebuff, she trudged back to her cave, and to those who enquired of her where she had been, she had only one evasive answer: "I have been to the House of the Lord, but found the door closed against me." But she never lost heart, she was determined to succeed; nay she was perfectly convinced that in His Own good time God would provide the means of bringing her to the place He had marked out for her. Nor was she disappointed.

Rita Enters the Monastery

Rita had always nourished a special devotion to Saint John the Baptist on account of the similarity between the circumstances of her own birth and his. Also, as a young girl, when she had first thought of being a nun, she had put herself under the protection of Saint Augustine and of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, who were well known in those parts owing to the neighbourhood of the Augustinian Monastery. She now redoubled her prayers to these heavenly Patrons asking them to secure the fulfillment of her holy desire, for God had placed it in her heart, and, humanly speaking, it was beyond her strength to attain. The answer was such as we do not often find, even in the lives of the Saints.

It was the year 1416, when Rita was already 35 years of age. One night while she was at prayer in her old home, there came a knock at the door and she was called by name. At first, she was terror-stricken, for she was absolutely alone. The knock and call were repeated, and then she felt in her heart the invitation: "Arise, make haste, My love, My beautiful one and come. For winter is now past, the rain is over and gone" (Canticle of Canticles 2:10) and without further hesitation she threw open the door. On the threshold stood three venerable-looking personages in whom she recognised her three Patrons. They beckoned and invited her to follow. Immediately they set off in the direction of Cascia and Rita noticed that they did not follow the usual path, but took one over the mountains, which even the hardest and most practised shepherds were ordinarily afraid to follow in the open day.

Finally, they reached the door of the Monastery of Saint Mary Magdalen, which opened before them as if unlocked

from within by an invisible hand. Preceded always by her guides, Rita passed through the corridors of the Convent and at last found herself in the Community Choir. There the Patrons bade her an affectionate farewell and departed. She knelt down in a remote corner and there in the faint light thrown by the lamp burning before the Blessed Sacrament she gave full vent to the feelings of humility, gratitude and love that filled her heart. In the meantime, the bell sounded for midnight Office and the nuns began to file into the Choir. Great was their surprise when they discovered the stranger. Here, surely, was a mystery! They quickly ascertained that all doors were securely barred and untampered with. Eagerly and excitedly, they questioned her. She told them quite simply and circumstantially how she had come to be there. The nuns were quick to see the clear manifestation of the Divine Will. They now warmly welcomed her into their midst and indeed felt highly privileged to have in their house such a favoured soul.

Life in the Cloister

Rita now felt like the traveller who, after many wonderings and strayings, has reached home at last. But she had no idea of giving herself to mere ignoble repose. Placed among the Spouses of Christ, she felt more than ever impelled to work for the sanctification of her soul and for the Glory of God and the Church. The time of her probation ended, she was admitted to the solemn Profession of her vows according to the Rule of Saint Augustine, and by their means and all the other helps which the Religious life so richly supplies, she advanced day by day with giant strides to the summit of perfection. Never, no matter what her trials, did she lose even for one moment during the rest of her life the deep-seated sentiments of gratitude and joy she had felt on that night of her miraculous arrival. She entered heart and soul into all the exercises of piety and penance of the Community. She gladly undertook the meanest labours, declaring herself to be the servant of all the Sisters. Throughout her whole life in the Monastery she retained undiminished and assiduously cultivated her love and zeal for Evangelical Poverty. Her poor cell was situated in a remote corner of the Monastery, and the only articles of furniture it contained were, at her own express desire, of the poorest and meanest kind.

Knowing the fundamental value of obedience as a corrective of self-love, she paid particular attention to that virtue. The Superioress had apparently some fears for the perfect submission of one who entered Religion so late in life. At least that would appear to be the human explanation of a strange command she laid on the saintly nun. God, we may be sure, had His Own designs in permitting or inspiring it. The command was that Rita should every day for a whole

year carefully water a vine-tree that was obviously withered and dead, and was only in fact a mere shrivelled trunk. Rita obeyed without a word of protest, and in consequence had to put up with many a jest and laughing remark from one or other of the Sisters. But at the end of the year, their smiles and indulgent pity for Rita's simplicity turned into amazement and awe. For one day they saw that the withered trunk had turned into a flourishing vine-tree which, in due time, produced an abundance of rich, golden-hued grapes! Today, after a lapse of five centuries, that vine-tree still stands and fructifies - a miraculous monument of perfect obedience. It is called the "Vine-tree of Saint Rita," and every year its grapes are sent to clients of the Saint all over the world.

Since in the time of Saint Rita the Enclosure as we know it today did not exist (it was introduced by the Council of Trent 1545-1563), the Saint was able to carry on an active apostolate among the people of the surrounding country. She was particularly interested in the work of reconciling warring factions and families - a very valuable and necessary work in those turbulent times. She soon acquired popular fame as a Peacemaker, and in this capacity was much sought after by persons of all classes of society. In fact wherever there was any misery of body or of soul, there she was to be found as a ministering angel, soothing, consoling, inspiring holy thoughts of resignation, charity and peace. Within the walls of the Monastery, the Sisters looked upon her as a living Saint. It has been well said of her that even if the Rule of Saint Augustine were lost it could be reconstructed and rewritten from a mere study of her conduct. Her favourite devotion - a devotion which she had learned from her parents in her youth and faithfully practised all her life - was to the Passion of Our Lord and to the Mother of Sorrows. So deeply was this engraven in her heart that all her thoughts, all her prayers and Masses and

Communion centred round this profound mystery. It was the thought of the sufferings of Jesus that had consoled her in all the terrible trials she had passed through as wife and mother and widow. Now in the haven of the Religious Life she was able to penetrate more and more the Truths of the Passion and Redemption. This devotion of hers was to receive a new impetus from an event which we will now describe.

The Miraculous Thorn

If Rita was distinguished for her love of Jesus, she was no less distinguished for her love of the Church founded by Jesus. The time in which she lived called forth all her loyalty and zeal, for heresy was rife and there had been a Schism which had lasted for long and had left dreadful ravages in its train. In addition to these troubles the Turks, approaching from the East threatened to destroy Christianity and the whole fabric of Christian civilization in Europe. As usual in such times of stress, God raised up His heroes to defend the Church - great military leaders and especially great apostles, foremost among whom were the great Franciscans, Saint Bernardine of Siena, Saint John Capistrano and Saint James della Marca. These were sent all over Europe to preach Crusades and arouse the princes and peoples against the Turks, and to oppose the inroads of heresy.

It fell to the lot of Saint James della Marca to evangelise Umbria, where the heretical sect of the Fraticelli was very powerful and active. In the course of his mission, he came to Cascia. His tremendous eloquence, inspired by fiery zeal, made a lasting impression and fortified the whole population in the Faith. The Churches not being able to contain his vast audiences, his sermons were delivered in the public square. They were devoutly and attentively followed by the Augustinian Nuns, and they made a particularly deep impression on Rita, who in all the turmoil of the times had never ceased to pray and sacrifice herself for the success of the preachers of the true Faith. One day, Saint James took for the subject of his discourse the Passion of Our Lord - Rita's favourite theme. Her heart burned within her at the inspired eloquence of the preacher. She felt an increased love for Jesus in His Passion, an increased desire to become

more like to the Man of Sorrows and even in her own body to share His sufferings, especially the sufferings caused to His Divine Head by the Crown of Thorns.

Full of these pious sentiments she returned to her Monastery. Now it happened that she had to pass by a picture of the Crucified painted on the wall of an oratory near her cell. She felt moved by a kind of irresistible force to throw herself on her knees before it. And then a wondrous thing occurred. A ray of light of extraordinary brilliance seemed to flash from the thorn-crowned Head of the Crucified to the head of Rita, and immediately she became conscious of a sharp, overpowering spasm of pain. A large thorn had struck her on the left side of the forehead towards the temple and such was the force of the blow that the thorn penetrated the head. She was discovered by the Sisters prostrate on the ground in what appeared to be a swoon, but was in reality an ecstatic seizure, and with blood flowing copiously from the wound. Wonderingly, and with only a dim realization of what had really happened, they removed her to her cell. The wound would yield to no human treatment. Instead, it became larger and more unsightly as time went on, so much so as to disfigure almost the entire face - that face that had formerly been so beautiful in its noble lines and especially in the gentleness and placidity of its expression. In course of time, the wound became putrid and gave out a most unpleasant odour, and, horrible to relate, vermin gathered on it, and every effort to remove them was in vain.

So utterly nauseating to sight and smell did it ultimately become that it became necessary to segregate Rita from the rest of the Community. This martyrdom of acute physical pain, of enforced solitude, of utter deprivation of all human consolation, lasted for the remaining fifteen years of her life - with only one brief interval, during which the external wound disappeared, as we shall presently see. The nuns and

other pious persons prayed for her liberation from what they considered a terrible evil - nay, some were even inclined to see in it a sign of abandonment by God - but Rita accepted it as the Gift of Jesus and gave fervent thanks for the granting of her request.

She found herself able to pray with a new fervour and confidence, and she prayed above all and offered her sufferings for the great gift of peace and a renewal of Christian life in the Church. It is prayers such as these, the prayers of humble, unknown souls, that bring success to the labours of the ministers of the Gospel. And we can well believe that the prayers and penances of Rita had undoubtedly their share under God in the happy events of the following years. Pope Eugene IV died in 1447. The greater part of his Pontificate had been an unusually stormy one; but he had the satisfaction before his death of seeing peace at last restored to the Church and to the nations, and the return to the unity of the Church of the great bodies of schismatics and heretics. Divine Providence gave to the Church a worthy successor in the person of Pope Nicholas V one of the greatest of the Popes.

Rita at Rome

In 1450, a Jubilee was proclaimed by Pope Nicholas V. It was an event of exceptional solemnity on account of the violent tempests which the barque of Peter had recently encountered and overcome and was marked with scenes at Rome of unexampled popular devotion. It was during this Holy Year that Saint Bernardine of Siena, the greatest Apostle of his time was enrolled in the list of the Saints, only six years after his death. The Augustinian Nuns of Cascia, in their zeal to gain the Indulgence of the Jubilee and to pray for the needs of the Church, determined to make a Pilgrimage to Rome.

In her love for the See of Peter, Rita conceived a vehement desire, which she felt sure was inspired by God, to accompany them. But when she asked her Superioress for the required permission, she met with a blank refusal. Indeed the good Superioress was almost scandalized that one so afflicted, one who had been confined to her own room for so long, should entertain the idea of leaving the Convent and undertaking such a journey. But, as usual in such circumstances, Rita had recourse to prayer to her Divine Spouse: "Lord, since You will I should go to Rome to do work pleasing to You, give me the means of doing so. I do not ask You to remove from me the seal of Your love or the participation in Your pains: I ask You only to remove for a time the outward sign. I ask this of You by the love You have always shown me."

Her prayer was heard. The wound seemed to disappear as if it had never existed. The Superioress could not help seeing a clear indication of the Divine Will and gave the desired permission. The other nuns also began to realize now, what

they were afterwards to understand more fully, that this suffering Sister was really the greatest glory of their Community. The little band of pilgrim-Sisters covered the entire distance to Rome on foot, relieving the monotony of the road by their prayers and hymns. Rita was then 69 years of age; she suffered excruciating pain from the wound which, though now invisible, seemed all the more severe for that very reason. Yet she was the happiest of the company, ever ready to cheer and assist the Sisters who were feeling the strain of the journey.

At Rome, she performed with the utmost devotion the exercises of the Jubilee, fully conscious of its value for her own soul, the souls in Purgatory and the needs of the Church. With what sentiments of love and veneration she must have visited the shrines of so many Saints, the tombs of the martyrs, the venerable Basilicas! Her outward appearance and manner were so edifying as to draw the attention of the people wherever she went, so much so that her fame reached the ears of Pope Nicholas V. He had her called to his presence, spoke most kindly to her, asked her prayers for himself and for the Church, and gave her a special blessing. This was the only visit of Rita to Rome; and it is more than a mere coincidence that on the occasion of another Jubilee four centuries and a half later - in the Holy Year of 1900 - another great Pope, Leo XIII, in the presence of 80,000 people in the Basilica of Saint Peter, inscribed her name among the Saints of the Church.

A Mysterious Illness

Scarcely had she regained her Monastery when the terrible wound again became visible. By this time, the prodigy could no longer be concealed, and people from all parts visited the Monastery to ask the prayers of the saintly nun. Many miracles took place. We read, for example, of an obsessed person freed from the tyranny of the evil one; of a poor hunch-back relieved from his infirmity, of a dying child cured at a distance - the Saint merely saying with infinite tenderness to the grief-stricken mother who had asked her prayers: "Go home, your child is cured." But while Rita never refused to pray for all in sorrow or pain, she remained firm in her resolve not to ask for the removal or mitigation of her own sufferings. The most she prayed for was "that she might be freed from the body and be with Christ, provided that she was sufficiently crucified." It was indeed God's Will that she should suffer even more in order to crown His work in her. The pain of the wound seemed to increase, and to it was added another mysterious infirmity, which the doctors were unable to identify or relieve, and which kept her confined to her poor pallet for the four years that remained to her on earth. This illness brought with it a trial she considered more severe than any bodily suffering; she was unable to receive Holy Communion at the altar, or even kneeling. When the Blessed Sacrament was brought to her cell she seemed confounded at what she considered a want of reverence in not being able to rise and adore, and after receiving it, she fainted away in an ecstasy of love.

During this last period of her life, there took place some beautiful incidents, which remind one forcibly of the words of the Canticle of Canticles (11:5): "Stay me up with flowers, compass me about with apples: because I languish with

love." It was early Spring, and the snow still lingered in the peaks and valleys of the adjacent Appennines. A relative from Roccaporena had come to visit Rita and before departure asked if there was anything from the old home she would bring at her next visit. "Since you are so kind and charitable," replied the dying Saint, "I ask you to bring me a rose from the garden of the little house that was once mine." The visitor wondered; nevertheless, on her return she paid a visit to the garden. What was her surprise to see a large rosebush, in full leaf, bearing in its summit one beautiful sweet-smelling rose! She brought the miraculous Rose to Cascia, where it was a source of consolation to Rita - she always loved flowers - and of reverent wonder to the Sisters of the Community. In commemoration of this event there is a beautiful ceremony carried out in Augustinian churches, and churches dedicated to the Saint on her Feast-day - the Blessing of the Roses. These are brought by clients who afterwards love to preserve them or send to distant friends for use, especially in cases of sickness.

During the following winter, the same relative again visited the Saint, and before taking leave of her, put the same question as before. "Yea," answered Rita, "I pray you to bring from the garden some figs." The visitor had now no shade of incredulity as on the former occasion. When she went to the garden, she found all the fig-trees bare except one, which was covered with foliage and weighed down with fresh, ripe fruit. She hastened with a generous supply to Rita, who gave thanks to God and invited all the other Sisters to join with her in the repast. By such wonders, God proclaimed the genuine sublimity of the sanctity of His servant. As a result, the number of visitors to the bedside of the Saint continued to increase. They came not only from Cascia and the surrounding districts, but from the most distant places, and no one was allowed to depart without a word of consolation or advice and a promise of her prayers.

Spring passed and the month of May - always a favourite month with Rita - came round once more. One beautiful day while the sunlight was playing on the walls of the poor cell, a brighter light, a light of heavenly splendour, flashed through it and at the same time, the face of Rita became irradiated with an ineffable joy. She seemed to faint away, and on returning to herself told the assembled nuns that Jesus and Mary had appeared to her saying: "Within three days you will be in Paradise." She immediately afterwards received with tears of gratitude and love, the Last Sacraments of the Church, and on the third day, clasping the Crucifix more closely to her breast, she peacefully rendered her blessed soul to God. It was Saturday, 22 May 1457, just at the completion of her 76th year, for it will be remembered that she was born on 22 May 1381.

Prodigies After Death

Scarcely had death taken place when prodigies of all kinds began to occur. Many persons asserted that they saw a great flame ascending from the Monastery towards the sky as if to signify the triumphal passing of her soul. The church-bells of Cascia and surrounding country rang out in festive harmony, though moved by no human hands. The cell in which the body lay became bathed in celestial light, and there issued from it an odour of indescribable sweetness, which spread all over the Monastery. Thus that poor room, which none could formerly enter without doing violence to the feelings, became a place of irresistible attraction. But it was the body above all that held the attention and admiration of all who were privileged to gaze upon it. Though it had been emaciated to the last degree by age, intense suffering and mortification, it now assumed an appearance of youth and of marvelous freshness and beauty. The horrible wound in the forehead became completely transformed and seemed to glow like a ruby. Other miracles were not wanting during the succeeding days. Many who had suffered from incurable maladies were relieved. Among these was the relative who had brought the rose and figs to Rita. As she kissed the hand of the dead Saint, she found life and vigour returning to an arm that had been paralysed for years. She was perfectly cured. This event served to arouse still further the popular devotion and enthusiasm, and, in response to the general demand, the body was exposed in the church for many days.

When it was at last decided to enclose the body, the sisters felt it was only fitting that a precious coffin should be provided. It was then that a certain celebrated artist presented himself before them, declaring that if he were only freed from the arthritis that rendered his arms

powerless, he would willingly make a casque that would be a work of art. He was cured at that instant and most faithfully did he fulfill his promise. He made two casques, an inside one of thick glass bound by iron clamps, and an outer one of oak, richly carved and ornamented. The whole work is one of the artistic triumphs of that great age of artistic skill. The body, enclosed within the casques, was then placed in the oratory where Rita had received the miraculous Thorn, but was made visible to the faithful through a grating opening into the church. On Feast-days and other special occasions, the outer casque was often thrown open. Multitudes continued to come from all quarters to venerate the remains, and thus began a cult, which, with the approval of the ecclesiastical authorities, lasted down the centuries until it received the supreme seal of the Church's approval by the Canonization of Rita.

The Prodigy of Incorruption

In 1626 was begun the first regular Process for the Beatification of Rita in accordance with the stricter procedure recently introduced. On this occasion, there was an official recognition or examination of the body in presence of the Ecclesiastical Judges and of the principal civic authorities of Cascia. Their report, still extant, is an interesting document. First, there is a full description of the casque. Then follows a description of the body, which was found to be incorrupt. "The body of the Servant of God appears as if she had only just died. The flesh is white, with no sign of decomposition. The forehead, eyes with eyelids and eyelashes, nose, mouth, chin and entire face are perfectly preserved. In a like manner, the veils she was accustomed to wear in accordance with the Rule of the Augustinian Nuns are also intact, but they impede one from seeing the wound of the Thorn in the forehead. Also, one can distinguish each finger with nail, et cetera, in the hands. The feet are bare and similarly well preserved." Another report dating from 1637 declares: "Not only is no part of the body missing or decomposed, but after 180 years she appears like one recently deceased, nay, rather like a person asleep."

It is not for us to penetrate the designs of Providence. The fact remains, however, that when in 1743 there was a new official examination of the body it was found to be almost totally decomposed.

Prayer to Saint Rita

Most powerful Protectress and mighty Advocate, Saint Rita of Cascia! Resplendent sun of the holy Catholic Church, mirror of patience, the scourge of demons, the health of the weak, the comfort of the needy, the admiration of the Saints and pattern of all holiness, beloved Spouse of Jesus Christ, crowned with and distinguished by one of His most sacred thorns: prostrate before you with all my heart, I beseech you to obtain for me holy resignation to the Divine Will in all the adversities of my life, and that I may contemplate with profit the Passion and Death of my God, which you with so much and such rare fervour did daily contemplate in the sacred crown of thorns. Pray, direct, O Beloved Advocate, Saint Rita, the intention of these my humble prayers, that by the amendment of my past sinful life I may gain pardon of all my sins and may join you in Paradise to enjoy God for all eternity. Amen.

Novena to Saint Rita

O holy Protectress of those who are in utmost need, who shines as a star of hope in the midst of darkness, in patience and fortitude as the Patriarch Job, scourge of devils, health of the sick, deliverer of those in extreme need, admiration of the saints and model of all states: with my whole heart and soul prostrate before you and firmly united to the Adorable Will of my God, through the merits of my only Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and in particular through the merits of His patient wearing of that tortuous crown of thorns, which you with a tender devotion did daily contemplate; through the merits of the most sweet Virgin Mary and your own most excellent graces and virtues, I implore you to obtain my earnest petition - provided it be for the greater glory of God and my own salvation (here make your request). Herein do you guide and purify my intention, O holy Protectress and most dear advocate, that I may obtain the pardon of all my sins and grace to persevere daily, as you did, in walking with courage and generosity and unwavering fidelity upon the heavenward path on which the love of my sweet Lord desires to lead me. Amen.

About This EBook

The text of this ebook is taken from the booklet Saint Rita - Wife, Mother, Widow and Religious by an unnamed Augustinian, published by the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland in 1935.

The cover image is a detail from a stained glass window of Saint Rita of Cascia, date and artist unknown; it's in the new church of the Assumption, Baselga di Piné, Trentino, Italy. It was photographed on 23 December 2018 by Syrio, and swiped from Wikimedia Commons.

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